

Tutor Perceptions of the Personal Academic Tutor Role:

An Appreciative Inquiry

Introduction

The research project came about as a result of informal conversations between teaching staff in the Department for Children and Families at the University of Worcester (UW). Anecdotal evidence suggested that staff whose roles included that of Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) had a variety of ideas and strategies evolved through experience and we wanted to learn more, challenge our assumptions and share best practice with colleagues across the School of Education. Even between ourselves; the authors, our practices differed, although our values and commitment to the PAT role were closely related. We wanted to find space in a crowded workload to explore how we might optimise our roles and realise in practice, our commitment to underpinning the PAT/student relationship with values of mutual trust and respect within a professional framework.

The PAT role can be pivotal in supporting students throughout their time in education. It can be particularly important for students during times of transitions; into Higher Education (HE) and when working towards graduation. It may be especially useful to individual students with specific learning needs and other vulnerabilities such as mental health issues. Students represent a diverse group and the PAT role offers an opportunity to monitor and optimise inclusion of potentially marginalised groups and individuals.

The UW Policy for Personal Academic Tutoring (2017) states that the role of the PAT in respect of their tutees is to:

- support academic development,
- act as a first point of call in the event of problems
- provide a UW reference

Supplementary guidance provides clarity in respect of procedural aspects of the role. Looking beyond the procedural, in order to optimise efficacy, we suggest PATs need to establish an effective working relationship with students, drawing upon a wide range of knowledge, interpersonal skills, and values. This is potentially demanding work and we were keen to explore the PAT experience from PATs' perspectives within our School.

Our aims in carrying out this research were:

- To explore PAT perceptions of the PAT role within the School of Education
- To identify PAT perceptions of professional boundaries
- To explore ways of supporting students whilst preserving PAT work/life balance
- To explore possibilities and limitations of standardised procedures in PAT support
- To share best practice

Literature Review

The Personal Academic Tutor

The PAT role varies within FE College and HE institutions, but some aspects are consistent. Most commentators see the role as having two main purposes; supporting

academic skills and nurturing students emotionally. A typical definition of a PAT is, “one who improves the intellectual and academic ability and nurtures the emotional well-being of learners through individualised holistic support” (Stork & Walker, 2015 p3). The student body in the UK is diverse, but whether students are young and straight from school, mature and returning to study, international students or online learners, attending university is a life-changing event (Grey & Osborne, 2018: p2).

The benefits of effective PAT support for universities are well documented. The Teaching Excellence Framework (date) has a focus on “student retention, satisfaction and employability” (p17) and there is evidence to support the value of the PAT role in this (Grey & Osborne, 2018, p2). PATs can be essential in easing the transition to university and, as the initial contact, the “face of the university” (Lochrie et al, 2018), they can help foster a sense of belonging in the student and a friendly face to approach when challenges occur.

Evidence has shown that PATs can improve student retention and success in the following ways: a) enabling students to develop a relationship with an academic member of staff in their discipline or programme area, and feeling more ‘connected’; b) helping staff get to know students; c) providing students with reassurance, guidance and feedback about their academic studies in particular (Thomas, 2012).

Three models of tutoring identified by Earwaker (1992, in Grey and Osborne, 2018) are Pastoral (PAT offering academic and personal support), Professional (trained staff for whom academic advice is their sole role) and Curriculum – integrated (Tutorials are embedded in modules). Group Tutorials can make good use of time and they can be helpful in fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging peer support (Thomas,

2012); however, these tend to be used in addition to individual Tutorials, rather than an alternative.

Personal Tutor Skills and Dispositions

Research has highlighted the fact that PATs should possess certain characteristics to facilitate the relationship with tutees, including 'empathy' (Dobinson-Harrington 2006; Ross et al. 2014; Stephen et al. 2008), 'friendliness' (Bassett, Gallagher, and Price 2014; Rhodes and Jinks 2005), 'being approachable' (; Sosabowski et al. 2003; Stephen et al. 2008), 'being non-judgmental' (Wootton 2013), being 'genuinely interested in the students' (Neville 2007; Ross et al. 2014; Sosabowski et al. 2003), being 'caring towards others' (Ross et al. 2014; Stephen et al. 2008); 'trustfulness' (Dobinson-Harrington 2006), 'supportiveness' (Rhodes and Jinks 2005; Stephen et al. 2008) and 'helpfulness' (Sosabowski et al. 2003).

What do Students Want?

A study for the HEA by Thomas (2012) identified the characteristics of successful personal tutoring as the key to improving student retention and success. In the study, students' responses established that effective personal tutoring is "proactive, integrated, structured and nurtures relationships" (p42).

Regular contact appears to be an important factor in personal tutoring and there is evidence that students who engage with their personal PAT regularly experience more satisfaction (Hester, 2010, cited in Grey & Osborne, 2018). It appears that students would prefer a PAT to be proactive in the instigation of meetings, rather than relying on students to make contact, (Thomas, 2012, p43).

It is not usual to make tutorials compulsory, although there have been institutions who have created modules with a requirement for tutorials, and increased satisfaction

regarding student support has been reported (Thomas, 2012, p45). With the increased fees for university education and the ensuing consumer mindset, student satisfaction rates are more important than ever, not least because of their visibility to future students through NSS survey results. Therefore, PAT support has taken on a more significant priority. However, a study by Ghenghesh (2018, p570) highlighted the fact that many academics disagree with tutorial meetings being mandatory, as they are “busy and prefer to have time to undertake their other work.”

Students’ Mental Health and Wellbeing

Emotion is inherent in the learning process and positive emotion drives motivation to succeed. Wilcox (2015) claims that nearly 90% of what enables us to grow professionally is emotional intelligence, therefore encouraging and supporting people leads to a positive experience and increased emotional intelligence, which in turn results in success. The Office for National Statistics (2018) report on loneliness showed that 9.8% of young people aged 16-24 said they felt lonely “often” or “always”, the highest proportion of these was in the 18 to 21 year-old group and major life changes, such as transitioning into university or work are said to be contributing factors. A subsequent study into loneliness in university students (Dickinson, 2018) showed that 55% of students questioned were concerned about coping with the course and 45.5% were concerned about their mental health / anxiety. Only 77% of students in the study felt that, if they needed help, someone would be there for them. This, then, clearly calls for the need for emotional support for students, potentially, from PATs.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that building a positive relationship is fundamental in fostering a sense of belonging and “buffering” against some of the challenges of university (Yale, 2019). In a recent study into PAT-student relationships,

Yale (2019, p539) found that “building a bond” with a PAT who genuinely cared about them was highly valued by students. It was important to students that the PAT knew them and met with them regularly, although this did not need to be in the form of formal meetings.

Boundaries

The difficulty in setting boundaries for PAT interactions is the ambiguity of what the role should encompass. It is generally accepted that the role consists of both academic support / guidance and emotional support (e.g. Dobinson-Harrington, 2006), although others argue it is a purely academic role (Earwaker, 1992). Support is closely related to the student’s personal circumstances, so tutors often find themselves hearing distressing personal accounts (Race, 2010). PATs and students’ varying conceptions of the role may undermine its effectiveness. This was found, not just with young students beginning their academic journey, but also with mature students engaged in PhD study Parker-Jenkins (2018, p57). In exploring student perceptions, Hughes et al (2012) highlight the importance of the PAT role in helping students to understand feedback on their work and developing their academic writing. However, students are often reluctant to approach their PAT for fear of being seen as failures, lacking in the skills that they think they should have when starting the programme of study. Hughes et al.’s (2012) study found that students were uncertain about the role of the PAT, and unsure of what they were allowed to ask for help with. This is underpinned by the messages that students are given as they arrive on their course, messages about them being “independent learners”. Being told “you are in charge of your own learning” repeatedly may give students the impression that they are expected to cope on their own, and that approaching someone for support is a weakness. The setting of

expectations and boundaries at the start of the relationship would appear to be central to a success for all concerned.

Many of us involved in education and academia would agree with Claxton's (1999, p15) claim that "Learning itself is an intrinsically emotional business". Students go through a whole range of emotions during the course of a programme of study; anxiety, panic, stress, frustration, excitement, pride, etc. Therefore, if emotions are present, then there is undoubtedly a need for emotional support for students. Change can have a major impact on people and transitions can affect emotional health and cognitive and intellectual development (O'Connor, 2012). According to Mortiboys, (2012, p2), educators should have emotional intelligence if they are to motivate and support their students, and this is as important as expertise in the subject taught. Many people are seen as naturally empathic; others less so. However, the latest neuroscience research shows us that 98% of people have the ability to empathise wired into their brains (Krznicaric, 2015). For those who have not tapped into their full empathic potential, empathy can, to a certain extent, be learned and increased. Hagenauer and Volet's (2014, p371) study into the PAT-student relationship highlights the importance of "belongingness" and "attachment" in these relationships and call for positive interactions and a relational approach to teaching. Empathy is essential in demonstrating care for students. In Yale's (2017) study, the greatest emotional impact identified arose from the perception that their tutor didn't care about them, which led to a damaged relationship and reluctance on the student's part to continue contact.

Time Constraints

Academic staff have numerous responsibilities on top of teaching, assessment and research; therefore, time is short (Lochtie et al, 2018) and time management, for many, is a constant struggle. Watts (2011; p216) suggested that intense workloads can “render robust personal tutor support particularly challenging, even burdensome” This has resulted in instances of insufficient time being given to tutorials (QAA, 2014). Ghengesh (2018) identifies the reasons for this as the rise in student numbers and the increased workload and consequent lack of free time available on staff timetables. Tutors questioned in Ghengesh’s (2018) research reported that their feelings towards the tutor role had been adversely affected by lack of contact. McFarlane’s (2016) research identified considerable guilt felt by personal tutors who wanted to provide more support but were unable to due to time constraints.

In a study conducted by Bassett, Gallagher, and Price (2014) the vast majority of the PATs believed that ‘there are problems with the perceived practice and/or delivery of PT [personal tutoring] in general’. Moreover, the interviewed PATs were unanimous in the view that personal tutoring meetings should not be mandatory. In addition, research suggests that due to the busy schedules of PATs they may tend to appear disinterested and lack empathy for their assigned tutees (Dobinson-Harrington 2006). Ghengesh, (2018) suggests that there is a need to be flexible, as the student may get on better with one of the teaching staff and would benefit more from talking to this person than their own tutor.

PAT Self-care

Gardner and Lane (2010; p343) describe personal tutoring as “emotional labour”, but tutoring is not generally characterised as a helping profession. Any role that involves an empathic personal relationship with others has the potential to affect stress levels,

with “burnout” and “compassion fatigue”. Although empathy is a strength, it can also be hazardous to our mental health, as we take on the pain and emotional distress of others (Tone and Tully, 2014) and so many educators may be struggling to find a work-life balance (Hodgkins, 2019: p46). It is vital that tutors are aware of their own stress and that they develop personal strategies to cope with this in a personal “mental health toolkit” (Hodgkins & Watson, 2017, p.37), but employers could provide support with this. The Health and Safety Executive (2019) states that stress related illness costs Britain over £5 billion per year, so employers also have responsibility for taking care of their employees’ mental health.

There is evidence to suggest that many tutors do not feel sufficiently confident or competent in supporting students through emotional upset (McFarlane, 2016) and this lack of confidence contributes to feelings of stress. Training and supervision for personal tutors is seen as lacking in Higher Education (Watts, 2011) and there is a need for supervision, support and training in dealing with intense personal issues and boundary setting.

Methodology

The research was informed by two dominant approaches: Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2008) and Action Research.

An appreciative enquiry approach suited our aims for several reasons. Firstly, our professional and anecdotal experience of working within the School of Education at UW suggested to us that PATs cared deeply about their tutees and were committed to being part of a meaningful and effective system of support. In such an environment, we were in a position to ‘look for what animates a setting [and can] ignite our thinking with possibilities rather than limitations’ (Cousins, 2008, p. 168). Secondly, by focusing

on the positive aspects of PAT praxes we could help identify commonalities of good practice and individual initiatives which might be taken up by others and become explicit commonalities. Thirdly, the University of Worcester has a track record of using appreciative inquiry (Kadi-Hanifi, et al. 2014) and so such an approach is in harmony with the values, traditions and praxes of our institution.

Action research as a methodology often involves researching one's own practice (McNiff, 2017) and since the research involved exploring our own and our colleagues' practice the work lent itself to this approach. Elliot (1999, p.535) identifies research on personal tutoring with action research since its aim is to "improve practice at specific higher education institutions, rather than to produce knowledge' and this aligned with our aims. Action research is a solution-based approach (Cousins, 2008) which suited our aims of exploring the praxes of individuals engaged in the collective endeavour of ensuring effective personal academic tutoring, and would help us to capture those elements which would contribute to our own and our colleagues continuing development and reflection on development. Further, action research encompasses practitioner or teacher research (McNiff 2017), of which there is a long tradition in education research. A principle of action research, highlighted by Cousins, (2008) is the notion of researching 'with' rather than 'on' participants. As emerging researchers, this appealed to us since it is intended that our study should represent a contribution to an academic and ongoing conversation regarding reflecting upon and developing practice, rather than a definitive statement or evaluation of others' practice.

Ethics

The first stage in the proposed research was to gain the co-operation and consent of the gatekeeper (Head of School) for initial access to the individuals to be recruited. Potential respondents were informed about the research by email and invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire of qualitative questions relating to their role as Personal Academic Tutors, using the Online Surveys platform to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Data extracted from the seventeen responses were kept confidential. Respondents were fully informed of the nature of the research and offered a copy of the completed research. The research was scrutinized by a University of Worcester Ethics Committee (2019) and underpinned by a protocol which included strategies for participation and withdrawal by participants.

Method

Questionnaires were sent to all PATs in the School of Education, via Heads of Department (see Appendix 1).

Documentary analysis of policies & procedures developed by the University of Worcester and information on the PAT system provided by the Student Union was carried out.

Analysis

From one hundred questionnaires there were seventeen responses. The raw data was separated into two categories; qualitative and quantitative. As the sample was small, and therefore insufficient to constitute a valid representation of the School of Education PAT system, quantitative data was employed only where it informed or amplified the interpretation of the qualitative data.

The data were first viewed with a 'wide-angle lens' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2007, p462) and none was discarded. This was in order to minimise preconceptions, bias and the premature formulation of themes or categories. This approach facilitated immersion in the data and the gradual emergence of generic categories (Table 1.1). Once established, typological analysis (Cohen Manion p 473) was adopted whereby the data was further organised into subsets. This process involved sifting and reflecting further on the data and refining and re-refining until the whole of the data was reflected by the typological sets as demonstrated in Table 1:1.

Generic categories	Sub-categories
Workload	Time
PAT boundaries regarding accessibility to students	Variation
	Team approach
	Flexibility
	Proactivity
PAT boundaries regarding interactions with students	Explicit boundaries
	Implicit boundaries, dispositions and values
	PAT challenges
	PAT self-care
PAT challenges	Training

Table 1. Categories of qualitative data

Results and Discussion

Workload

There was considerable variation in PATs' estimates of how much of their workloads involved carrying out the PAT role. This ranged from 1- 20% with a mode average of 10%. Four respondents indicated that they were allocated hours for work as a PAT but eight did not know. Of seventeen responses, fourteen ranked their PAT role as high or very high in their priorities. This evidenced their high commitment to and recognition of the importance of the role.

The data corresponded with literature which acknowledges that PATs have a multiplicity of professional demands on their time and competing priorities (Ghenghesh, 2018, Lochtie, 2018). Aside from the recognition of its importance as a mechanism for meeting students' needs, other factors were apparent that impinged on PAT workload. One response suggested that student perceptions impacted on the priority given:

'student correspondence takes priority in my workload over and above most things as students are particularly sensitive to this'.

One PAT suggested that group or vertical tutorials (where students from higher levels of study could give advice to others) might be explored, but was uncertain how this would be implemented. The literature suggests that group tutorials can be a good use of PATs' and students' time and also potentially foster supportive peer relationships (Thomas, 2012). However, these potential benefits need to be considered against the potential disadvantages of compromising individualised support and/or confidentiality.

The variety of practices in accessibility arrangements evidenced differing perceptions regarding time management and how to balance the needs of PATs and students. One strategy suggested asking students to confirm *their* availability (thereby

acknowledging their interests) and then email an appointment within that time to suit the PAT. This would help obviate to-ing and fro-ing of email correspondence which can be time-consuming. Another PAT suggested the use of technology (such as Calendly) can help achieve this aim.

PAT boundaries regarding accessibility to students

Variation

There was a wide variation in practices regarding accessibility of PATs to their students. With regard to response times to emails, these ranged from an aim to respond immediately to a response within two, three or five days. Similarly, whereas some PATs operated within clear boundaries, answering email correspondence only within working or office hours, two PATs answered emails in the evenings and at weekends, one to ensure 'being available' to students and the other due to workload.

This variation in approach was also evident in PATs' practices regarding access to tutorials. Again, two PATs indicated maximum availability to students including one describing their approach as 'open-door'. In contrast, five stated that they have clear boundaries in terms of their availability from which they never deviate. Ten PATs operate within boundaries, but flexibly. Boundaries stated included availability within working hours on campus, and availability based around other PAT commitments. One PAT reported that an Administrator organises the tutorials on behalf of PATs in their department. Another approach was based on mutual accommodation of PATs' and students' commitments. Other PATs prioritise students' convenience with one responding,

'I try to accommodate students by arranging to see them at a time that suits them'.

Team approach

There was evidence of a team approach since one PAT reported, ‘

As team, we have agreed that we will not respond over the weekend or later at night’

and another suggested,

‘It would be helpful to have a consistent approach in terms of accessibility’.

A team approach in relation to boundaries whereby email responses were sent only in office hours (depending upon the hours of the course), could impact positively on student perceptions of the value of their individual PAT/student relationship. Since it was suggested that students are ‘particularly sensitive’ to the timeliness of responses, a common approach might avoid feelings that some students are treated less favourably than others or that some PATs are more available than others.

Flexibility

Some PATs evidenced a flexible approach, such as scheduling tutorials to fit in with evening teaching sessions or where daytime tutorials were impractical for students. There was clear evidence of responsiveness to individual needs where students were distressed or in crisis. These included, offering evening telephone tutorials. PATs’ values were evidenced in their use of terms including ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘responsiveness’ and these were cited as reasons for divergence from routine practice. With regard to students on online courses and those who attend evening sessions one PAT explained,

‘I am always trying to think of ways in which I can develop my practice with these [online] students’.

Another said of online students,

‘It would be valuable if a system of offering support could be developed’. Effectiveness in their role with students across programmes was another concern for PATs. These comments indicated a concern for non-typical students who were not able to access traditional sources of support available face-to-face or during office hours.

Whereas a commonality of approach may be helpful in inculcating objectivity and professionalism in the PAT/student relationship, the data reflected the need for flexibility depending upon student needs; an obvious example being individual circumstances such as family or employment responsibilities or an acute crisis. Adherence to clear boundaries, consistent across course teams with a degree of flexibility to accommodate responsiveness to individual students could help optimise student support whilst maintaining balanced expectations of PATs.

Proactivity

The data reflected a pastoral model as dominant, recognising the need for emotional as well as academic support, (Earwaker (1992), in Grey and Osborne, 2018, Stork & Walker, 2015). The responses clearly showed that PATs are proactive in their roles and that individuals and teams have evolved mechanisms for improving accessibility. PATs often take the initiative to email at important points in the year, keeping in touch with students and also ‘making sure they are ok’. One PAT pointed out that this was particularly important for students who have interrupted their studies. Keeping in

contact helped with 'inducting them back in'. Some departments gave personalised welcome cards at induction with contact details and information about the PAT role.

There is evidence in the literature that students prefer proactive tutoring (Thomas, 2012) and we would suggest that this represents the removal of a potential barrier to effective tutoring in that it does not rely upon students to take the initiative to effect contact. This in turn potentially impacts positively on student retention (Thomas, 2012).

PAT boundaries regarding interactions with students

Explicit boundaries

As was apparent in PAT practices with regard to accessibility, there was considerable variation in how and to what extent PATs manage their interactions with students.

Some PATs put in place explicit boundaries regarding their interpersonal PAT- student relationship, addressing this in the first meeting, clarifying the nature and extent and limits of the role and re-emphasising this as necessary throughout the term of the relationship. Examples of explicit practice included information sheets based on UW tutoring guidelines for students and one PAT referred to the Teacher Standards (DfE, 2011). Another used structured formats to meetings and expectations of professionalism;

'I expect students to be prepared before they come to me. I expect appropriate tone in communication and model this'.

'Signposting' is the most common example of an explicit boundary used by PATs. There were several reasons given for signposting including limits of expertise and

availability of specialist support within the University as well as the importance of not acting as a 'crutch' or counsellor.

The setting of goals featured as an explicit strategy informing interactions with one respondent stating the need for clear, mutually agreed outcomes of tutorials. Negotiating and co-constructing goals with students helps them to identify and focus upon their own interests, provides a future-focused approach and also demonstrates care and concern on the part of the PAT.

Another strategy focused upon the process rather than the structure of tutorials:

'I make it clear that it is the student who owns the process, not me. I support, facilitate and signpost by offering ways forward and suggestions.'

Wilcox (2015) claims that nearly 90% of what enables us to grow professionally is emotional intelligence. Therefore, supporting students' independence within a facilitative environment may help support their emotional growth and feelings of competence.

Much of the data reflected a pastoral model of tutoring based on an ethic of care, a feature which according to Yale, (2019) is valued highly by students and Hagenauer and Volet's (2014, p371) cite students' need for "belonging" and "attachment" is supported by a relational approach.

It is important that PATs and students have a shared understanding of the boundaries and extent of the role at the start and throughout the relationship. Variation in PAT/student conceptions may undermine its effectiveness, (Parker-Jenkins, 2018, p57). Therefore, explicit boundaries are helpful to students and PATs. When articulated to students, explicit strategies, can help avoid misunderstandings or misconceptions about the role. It may seem obvious to PATs what their role is but this

is not necessarily the case with students and may lead to reticence on their part for fear of appearing foolish or being exposed as lacking in knowledge or independence (Hughes et. al., 2012).

Implicit boundaries dispositions and values

PATs responses indicated emphases upon specific values including 'reliability', 'honesty', 'caring', 'integrity' and 'mutual respect'. This further evidenced the relational approach which characterised many of the responses.

The data provided clear evidence of how PATs used their interpersonal skills in their interactions with students. PATs reported their awareness of the importance of body language, active listening and combining empathy with objectivity and making students feel acknowledged and valued. One respondent indicated how they used body language and tone of voice as tools, modifying according to the circumstances:

'one student came to be feeling very upset as one of their friends had been arrested for a safeguarding offence. They were feeling guilty for not noticing that this was happening and doubted their ability to work with children in the future. I took a gentle approach with this student - another time a student might not have made any effort to meet targets set at previous meetings; in this situation I would be more "business like" to indicate that the student has made the choice to come to university and so should take responsibility for their own actions'.

Another example demonstrated the same awareness of students as individuals with bespoke needs, emphasising:

‘support[ing] a student to reach their own potential - this might be to move from a D grade to consistently achieving a C - this should be celebrated as much as the student who is able to attain the A grade’.

Another PAT reported, ‘I always consider things in the bigger picture and never assume that things happen in isolation. When a student comes to me with an issue and try and find out if there are other factors involved’.

Supporting students’ emotional wellbeing and employing an ethic of care in PAT practice carries the tacit acknowledgement that emotion is inherent in learning (Claxton, 1999). Therefore, there is a potential tension between being supportive and blurring the boundaries between the professional and the personal. This can occur on the part of students as well as PATs particularly where students are particularly vulnerable, due to personal and/or mental health difficulties and become over-reliant on the PATs emotionally. This can lead to difficulties for PATs, such as students being reluctant to seek help from other sources even when encouraged to do so by their PATs. It was clear from the data that many PATs were aware of this and employed implicit boundaries and strategies to avoid and manage more challenging dynamics in their student PAT relationships.

One response indicated a need for objectivity, citing the importance of being ‘Being transparent, objective, non-judgemental, challenging when necessary and knowing the limits of the relationship, both in terms of my expertise and not getting personally involved’.

The following extract demonstrates how a personalised and values-based approach can be used skilfully to establish or re-establish explicit boundaries and provide shared understanding of the PAT relationship:

‘The student stated they had completed work, but it transpired that this was not true. I sensitively explained that it was evident that the work hadn’t been completed. I explained that to be able to offer support as adults we must have mutual trust and respect for each other. I briefly explained that the PAT relationship is based on mutual respect and to be able to support academic development we need to be open and honest. After this the student admitted that she had not been truthful and asked for support. I thanked her for this honesty and then supported her to make a plan for the way forward’.

PAT challenges

One of the challenges to consistent boundaries included responding to student needs and expectations. There were clear examples of student misapprehension about the PAT role such as a PAT being asked to review a housing contract. It is clear however, that not all issues are so easily remedied and whilst all PATs were aware of the need for boundaries, being consistent was sometimes be challenging. Examples given included a lack of experience;

‘Early in my teaching career I felt that I had to be part of the solution’

and over-empathising

‘I know I do too much and try to be their teacher / counsellor / friend / mother’.

Another response included getting

‘drawn into long conversations about home life and blurring the boundaries between PAT and counsellor’.

These responses suggest that PATs are potentially influenced by their perceptions of their students' emotional reliance upon them. There was evidence of emotional reliance on PATs by students. For example, one PAT was told by a student.

'I don't want to let you down or disappoint you'.

This reflects an expectation or assumption on the part of the student that the PAT role is subjective rather than professional. It highlights the need for clear boundaries to be established at the beginning of the PAT/student relationship and maintained throughout its course since we would argue that blurred boundaries can place undue burden on PATs and lead to discontentment on the part of students.

Students comparing PATs' different approaches and levels of engagement was also cited by one PAT as potentially challenging.

PAT uncertainty featured as a challenge of the PAT role. Sometimes, this was a lack of knowledge of a module, course or procedure for example where a PAT had no knowledge of the course their student was studying. However, sometimes the adverse nature and extent of students' difficulties caused anxiety for PATs. This was exemplified in the following extract where a student:

'...explained that her absence and lack of engagement on the course was due to an abusive partner and an ongoing police investigation... I did not know how or if I should record this information and felt compromised by it and completely unsure of what my position or advice to her should be'.

This response mirrors the literature (McFarlane, 2016) which acknowledged students' emotional distress as a potential source of anxiety and challenge for PATs.

PAT self-care

In the responses regarding boundaries in their interactions with students, there was little evidence as to how PATs safeguarded their own well-being. This may suggest that some PATs do not recognise their interactions with students as involving 'emotional labour' Gardner and Lane (2010). However, in terms of tutor accessibility there were practical strategies apparent which overtly or tacitly acknowledged the need for self-care. These included not disclosing personal phone numbers and ascertaining students' approval regarding the content of recorded notes. One respondent said that sharing information with phase leads was useful in terms of 'off-loading' emotionally.

Training

Whilst some PATs used expertise from other fields of experience, others felt that they would benefit from more training in respect of supporting students emotionally.

Conclusions

Whilst the number of responses was too few to represent the full picture of practice, the responses received yielded rich data and gave us some insights into perceptions and practices of PATs and enabled us to highlight what we consider to be best practice within our original aims:

Our aims in carrying out this research were to identify and share best practice within the PAT role in the School of Education by

- exploring PAT perceptions of the role
- identifying PAT perceptions of professional boundaries
- exploring ways of supporting students whilst preserving PAT work/life balance

- exploring possibilities and limitations of standardised procedures in PAT support

Our conclusions regarding best practice are as follows:

PAT perceptions of the role

PATs employed a pastoral or relational approach to their role. PATs care about their students and recognise the importance of treating them as individuals with individual needs. This approach was underpinned by values; namely an explicit commitment to inclusion, respect and an ethic of care. This was evident where:

- team approaches were consistent and transparent but with in-built flexibility to accommodate responsiveness to individual students thereby optimising student support whilst maintaining balanced expectations of PATs.
- students' perceived perceptions of equality of treatment was acknowledged as a consideration in respect of approach and practices
- PATs were proactive and as individuals and teams have evolved mechanisms for improving accessibility such as: initiating regular contact with students rather than just reacting to students' requests; providing hard-copies of relevant information at induction and/or at initial PAT meetings
- PATs tailored responses to individual needs. These included, offering telephone tutorials and provision tailored to students whose courses are online or not within traditional office-hours. PATs were concerned to mitigate this.

PAT perceptions of professional boundaries

One of the challenges of the PAT role is the tension between providing pastoral and emotional support whilst maintaining professional boundaries. Boundaries help to avoid misunderstandings about the nature and extent of the role. We identified practices which might help to manage student expectations including:

- establishing and clarifying the PAT role in the initial PAT meeting
- maintaining mutual understandings throughout the PAT/student relationship through agreeing outcomes
- co-construction of the purpose and extent of the relationship
- clear signposting when appropriate in order to minimise the possibility of over-reliance of students on their PAT
- setting mutually agreed goals
- avoiding subjective judgement and personal involvement
- PAT self-awareness of emotions, limits of expertise, body language and tone of voice
- ascertaining students' approval regarding the content of recorded notes

Supporting students whilst preserving PAT work/life balance exploring possibilities and limitations of standardised procedures in PAT support

That PATs have busy schedules and other professional responsibilities is uncontested. The following avenues might be explored in order to optimise time management:

- Using technology to support accessibility such as Calendly
- Using standardised emails for generic information
- Using group tutorials as a means of imparting generic information
- Agreed approaches from teaching teams to email response times, tailored to individual courses rather than departments to reflect the differing complexions of courses within departments

In terms of preserving PATs' personal boundaries, practice included:

- not disclosing personal phone numbers.
- offloading with phase leads or other appropriate colleague whilst maintaining confidentiality
- recognition of individual training needs, and use of the appraisal system for availing of training opportunities

It is clear that the majority of tutors within the School of Education at the University of Worcester perceive their PAT role to be important or very important to them and their students. They evidence a commitment to inclusion which was rooted in their value systems in addition to compliance with the University policy. We hope to have illuminated some of the excellent commitment and practice taking place and to have made a contribution to the ongoing development of the PAT role.

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Appendix

1. Do you get hours allotted for your PAT role? If so, how many?
2. What do you estimate is the percentage of your work associated with your PAT role?
3. What priority do you afford to your PAT role in respect of your workload? Can you explain your answer?
4. To what extent do these aspects feature as an area of focus in your PAT meetings? (tick all that apply) (employability personal issues academic writing explaining grades module issues other)
5. What boundaries or ground rules do you put in place with your PATS in terms of your accessibility?
6. Do you always adhere to these? Please explain your answer
7. What boundaries do you put in place in terms of establishing mutual expectations regarding the PAT student /Tutor relationship? Has this ever been challenging? Can you give an example?
8. What do you feel are the most effective aspects of your practice as a PAT in terms of supporting students?
9. Are there any examples of good practice/development you would be able to share?
10. What do you feel are the least effective aspects of your practice as a PAT in terms of supporting students?
11. What ideas do you have for optimising the impact of the PAT student /Tutor system?